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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the appropriateness of open education for educable mentally retarded (EMR) and educationally handicapped (EH) children, pointing out that the philosophy of individualized instruction basic to open education allows for the inclusion of handicapped children. Noted are benefits of open education for the handicapped (such as an experience-oriented learning climate) and special techniques needed (such as provision of quiet areas for distractable children). Cited are results of a Florida study in which the philosophy of the open-middle school was deemed especially hospitable to EMR children, and listed are minimal provisions determined in that study for including handicapped children in an open environment (such as easily accessible toilet facilities). A successful California experiment which incorporated a variety of audiovisual aids and a resource center to provide a regular classroom program for EMR and EH students is described. Also noted are arguments against the open regular setting for the retarded such as the EMR child's need for a limited curriculum and teachers with specialized training. (LS)

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OPEN EDUCATION AND THE HANDICAPPED

A PAPER FOR THE
INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY COURSE FOR TEACHERS

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OPEN EDUCATION AND THE HANDICAPPED

Until recently, the major thrust of the literature dealing with mentally retarded and educationally handicapped children has been an emphasis on the special problems and ability deficits of those children when compared to the so-called "normal" child. The literature has further stressed the importance of providing a learning environment, separate from that regular class structure, which would be better able to identify, assess and cope with those factors which affect learning for the retarded child and to provide compensatory services so as to create ultimately learning opportunities equivalent to those available to the non-handicapped student.

During the past few years, however, authors in the field of exceptional education have offered new alternatives to a very old, and still prevalent concern -- the education of children with problems in learning. Some of the new directions include: partial mainstreaming, regular class placement with a heavy emphasis on instructional resources, integration into special subject areas and a total "open" concept for the educationally handicapped and mentally retarded child. Each concept has for its foundation the same basic philosophy -- all children have certain abilities and disabilities. The nature of the ability and disability areas and the degree to which one outweighs the other is unique to every child. The ideal is to build on strengths and compensate for deficits.

Because of this emphasis, the curriculum for the retarded child has in the past traditionally resulted in a less rigid and more individualized program commensurate with his needs. In many cases, such individualization of instruction has not been available to the "normal" child because his ability quotient was such that he is able to function in larger groups with rather strict subject-oriented curricula. Today many of those same normal children are experiencing freedoms of individualized programs within the "open classroom"

concept. Class size is still larger than groups usually found in the special education classes. But the number of teachers with whom the student comes into contact has increased and the number of instructional materials available to him has increased, including many materials which are teacher-and-pupil made. The result is that in many instances, the only difference between the "regular" classes and "special" classes is in the number of pupils and not in basic philosophic structure. What better argument could be made for the inclusion of handicapped youngsters into such regular open classes where each child is recognized for his own abilities and allowed to develop to his own best potential.

We must ask ourselves these questions now. Must all of the handicapped children be kept out of the regular classroom setting to be properly educated? Is it necessary to stigmatize and isolate all handicapped children in order to effectively educate them? It is true that many retarded children left to themselves cannot adjust or get along in a regular classroom or open classroom setting. Consequently, rejection by teachers and other students could result. But an integrated program which correlates acceptance and achievement will find many educable mentally retarded and educationally handicapped pupils more highly motivated toward academic achievement than their non-handicapped peers.

In order to consider the appropriateness of open learning for handicapped populations, it is helpful to reflect upon the nature of open learning. According to Jean Palmieri (4), the concept of open learning focuses on four main characteristics:

1. An individualized, instructional program which utilizes test results for grouping.

2. The need for manipulative materials in great diversity.

3. The emphasis on use of books and materials supplied by the children and an on-going display of their work.

4. The opportunity for children to move freely about the room without seeking permission.

The nature of open concept, when well designed with the special child in mind, can be a marvelous contribution to special education and regular education alike. Before this concept can function successfully, however, there must exist an appreciation for atypical learning styles and a knowledge of how to adjust the program to suit the needs of the special child.

> The child must not learn by rote that which he cannot understand; he must rather learn from experience that which he can understand. (4)

An experience-oriented learning climate which is a conceptual basis for the open concept can have a very positive effect on a child's development. The child is continually self-motivated from the successes he experiences in learning through activities that are interesting and relevant to him. It is a great challenge to create an experience-oriented climate and maintain conditions conducive to learning for the atypical child. Whereas in the traditional classroom the emphasis might be on maintaining order, the open concept discourages the teacher from becoming a disciplinarian. The distractable and/or hyper-active child who requires a setting controlled for minimum sound and movement can best be served in the open classroom if there are "quiet areas" or small separate cubicles where he may retreat in an effort to reduce the stimuli around him. These quiet areas could take the form of carrels or other improvised enclosures designed to screen out the surrounding environment. A variety of very simple and specific behavior modification

techniques can be used, such as star charts and check list charts, for work completion or improvement in attention. They provide the child with an orderly and routine check of his own commitment to the program without the pressures of too many demands -- too much to do.

The distractable, day-dreaming or hyper-active child may also have a poor conception of time or scheduling within an open concept environment. The educable mentally retarded child or the educationally handicapped child could find the varying schedules confusing. Therefore, the teacher must establish with the child the habit of planning his day: referring to a clock when planning the schedule, displaying the clock in the classroom, teaching the pupil to refer to the clock during his activities, recording his schedule, reporting in a notebook the completion of an activity, and referring to the clock during his activities. Following these procedures can be a real asset to the handicapped child in this type of educational program.

The variety of learning methods available in the open concept can also be a positive element for the slow learner. Not only can pupil-tutoring help to individualize learning, but the use of manipulative materials geared to each child's level of learning is very relevant to youngsters with learning problems. Manipulative discovery materials bring to the classroom important media for pupil experiences. The educable mentally retarded child and the educationally handicapped child learn more effectively through manipulation and dramatization and through observation of concrete objects.

Flexibility in scheduling combined with a varying combination of learning levels and ages for whole or part of the day are also essential ingredients in the recipe for open education. Such an atmosphere should allow pupils to

work on activities for varying lengths of time, and also permit one pupil to work with another on a special activity or assist another youngster in a pupil-tutor program. This emphasis can provide the educable mentally retarded and the educationally handicapped child with an atmosphere of cooperation and helpfulness so essential for the development of a positive self image and the fostering of the concept "I can."

The open concept also fosters success by "learning through doing." This becomes a motivation factor for the slow, highly distracted, mentally retarded child. He can be far more highly encouraged toward success when concrete experiences are assigned -- counting change at a store, measuring furniture, or writing all his new words in sand or paint — rather than more abstract exercises such as reading or written work sheet assignments.

Open concept provides for the opportunity to succeed in learning. Each child works at his own level of achievement and is evaluated on the progress he makes in relation to his own ability, growth and development; and not in comparison to the norm. And it is so important that mentally retarded and educationally handicapped children experience such success in their daily work.

In a recent study sponsored by the Florida State Department of Education in Tallahassee and conducted by special educators during a summer institute, the appropriateness of the open-middle school concept for the exceptional child was evaluated (2). The study provided for the exceptionalities of children to be ordered along a continuum of intactness of the adaptive mechanism, and described environmental variables in terms of fifteen basic environmental elements including: space, time identity, consistency, privacy, territoriality, articulation among spaces, transistion, alternatives and decisions, movement, socializing agents, usability by the child, character,

acoustical settings, visual settings, climate control. Dealing basically with the intellectual, physical, social/emotional and vocational characteristics of 10 - 14 year old handicapped children, the institute examined the relationship between the flexibility of the open school's program and the fifteen environmental elements listed above. Of the exceptional children studied by the institute the educable mentally retarded child was usually the first to experience inclusion into the open-middle school. Though the reasons varied, the results were fairly consistent and tended to point up interesting facts as far as the open program was concerned. Significantly, the philosophy of the open-middle school seemed to be especially hospitable to the needs of the educable mentally retarded child, and reflected the usual organizational structure for the handicapped child of this age. Because of the exploratory opportunities offered as part of the open-middle school philosophy, the educable mentally retarded youngster was given the opportunity to more nearly successfully compete and develop social relationships with his peer groups. It was also found that, within his own educable mentally retarded group, he was learning the competencies that he would use in later exploratory sessions provided for in the open-middle school.

However, the institute did find that the effectiveness of the program for the educable mentally retarded was nullified if the students were placed in an unsupervised, totally open space. They also found that a sharp dichotomy appeared across the 55 to 75 I.Q. range of the educable mentally retarded when assigned to an open-middle school. The upper group had been able to some extent to move into the middle class program; the lower groups were not as successful. The institute also made a special point of noting that, based on their study of the environmental elements and the concept of

openness, it was imperative to exercise caution in including deaf, socially maladjusted, and/or emotionally disturbed children in an open-middle school setting.

The institute elaborated on the needs of the educable mentally retarded child and the educationally handicapped child in the open environment. The following minimal provisions were found by the institute to be necessary for successful open environment learning for such a child.

1. Space should be made available for those youngsters who cannot tolerate the complexities of openness.

2. Space must be flexible for small groups and for individual students.

3. "Time out" space should be provided with a cot for resting.

4. Adequate storage space must be available for a variety of teacher and pupil oriented materials.

5. Toilet facilities should be easily accessible to all.

6. Learning areas should be easily recognized and labeled.

7. Differential environmental control for varied areas and activities should be available such as lighting, acoustics, and temperature.

8. Furniture should offer the maximum of adaptability.

9. Observation areas, if included for teachers and other interested visitors, should be so designed so as to prohibit distraction of and stimulus response from students.

10. Transition spaces between the learning areas should provide pressure reduction factors such as avoidance of heavy in-school pedestrian traffic, use of music, acoustical control, color and texture to help the child maintain his inner control and reduce anxieties.

11. Entrance to a learning area should not be through other instructional areas.

12. There should be an outside exit from the teacher's work room but not directly from the area used by the youngsters.

In addition to the competencies of diagnosis and remediation that all teachers should possess, teachers involved in open concept teaching should have individualized and sequential programming techniques based on a comprehensive overview of both regular and special curriculum materials for all grade levels. They should have a thorough knowledge and understanding of behavorial principles as they apply to the management of those children particularly for the emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted and they should show an ability to organize concerted efforts as a team member with psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, juvenile officials and other professional personnel.

An interesting experiment for the educable mentally retarded and educationally handicapped child was conducted in Fountain Valley School District in California (1). This experiment was operated through a Federally funded Title III program which provided a new regular classroom experience for 82 educable mentally retarded and 24 educationally handicapped youngsters. The children ranged in age from 6 to 14 years with I.Q.'s as low as 45. The program made use of a wide variety of audio-visual learning media designed specifically to individualize learning. A strong emphasis was placed on constant diagnosis and prescription and evaluation by the resource teacher throughout the year. Emphasis was also placed on an environment which allowed the children to move freely in and out of their resource center, the regular classroom and a central learning center. For the 82 educable mentally retarded

and 24 educationally handicapped students, the resource center became home base. The resource teachers made use of many audio-visual aides including Language Master and the Hoffman Electronics Corporation series. Materials facilitated individualized programs through earphones, records and tapes, and provided each student with a minimum amount of distraction and an opportunity to build on his success without the stresses which accompany open competition. Many of the audio-visual materials allowed the students to see and hear a correct response, record his own response and compare his response to the correct one. Operation was relatively easy and most of the retarded youngsters easily learned to use the materials.

The success story of Fountain Valley and the positive findings of the institute in Florida are in marked contrast to the "Issues" taken against the open regular setting for the exceptional child by Dr. Landis M. Stetler of the Department of Education for the Exceptional Child in Florida (5). Dr. Stetler, in a report to Exceptional Educators, takes issue with the concept of open education for the retarded. He notes in his paper that there are certain children who need more adaptations than the average school can provide; adaptations in the areas of curriculum, methodology, and educational management. In curriculum, these children need to utilize their limited intellectual resources to study and learn what they need to know in order to function in the society of their immediate environment. This somewhat limited curriculum must be provided in place of the complex and varied curriculum so essential to the open concept. In the area of methodology, many of these children cannot learn effectively from teachers who are ill-equipped to understand and comprehensively deal with their varied needs. Their teachers require specific training in exceptional education. According to Dr. Stetler, in the

area of educational management, there are many youngsters who cannot tolerate the usual classroom environment. Therefore, they either disrupt or are disrupted to a point that they and the class cannot function appropriately.

Dr. Stetler feels it is important that, although we must not categorize children, we must categorize programs and recognize the distinct need for special education classes. He elaborates by noting that with the on-set of open education more youngsters are being found who need help in special education classes. Some of them are hyper-active and cannot settle in for any length of time. Some have a forced response to stimuli and must attend to things around them and cannot concentrate. There are those who react to spaciousness in a negative way and who simply need a small area. And lastly, Dr. Stetler maintains that there are youngsters who do not respond favorably to constant change of focus in the learning environment.

The authors take no quarrel with Dr. Stetler's concerns. For, to adhere to the theory of individualization is to understand that there is no one "right" learning environment for all children. However, many children who could otherwise be stigmatized throughout their young and eager lives as educable mentally retarded children can, through open education, experience a new life with other children in the regular classroom. The new program requires resource teachers, dedicated classroom teachers, positive children and special equipment. The very nature of mental retardation in this country might be dramatically changed if, through integration in educational experiences, the mentally retarded come to be viewed as individuals who are located on one end of a spectrum in intellectual capabilities but who are scattered all over the spectrum in other respects (e.g. social abilities, caring for others, willingness to work).

Perhaps the most important aspect of the retarded child's educational

program is success. Experiencing success can maintain the positive self-concept which is a basic prerequisite to a self-reliant, happy, working adult. The open concept philosophy endorses success and is certainly a daring and exciting adventure for teachers and pupils alike. However, it is important for all who initiate this concept to be fully aware of the implications of providing open education experiences for mentally retarded and educationally handicapped youngsters, and to meet those challenges with a willingness to expend the time and energy required to provide individualized programs so structured as to ensure each pupil his rightful measure of achievement.

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